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AUTHOR Stein, Nan
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ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment in schools is a public event, which means that there are witnesses, bystanders, and spectators to many of these occurrences. This paper argues that because sexual harassment is a public event, it is very damaging to its targets as well as bystanders by teaching others that schools are not safe or just. Schools may also serve as training grounds for domestic violence. A review of two surveys of sexual harassment in schools--a "Seventeen" magazine survey (March 1993) and the Harris Poll/American Association of University Women survey (June 1993)--revealed that sexual harassment is public, extensive, and routine. Most girls reported that they resisted their harassers and that schools did not respond 45 percent of the time. Disseminators of these findings encountered a "backlash," which downplayed the seriousness of the situation. Finally, symmetry and parallels existed between what girls' narratives said about their school experiences and the experiences that were revealed by lawsuits and depositions. Quotations from female students describing their encounters with and feelings about sexual harassment are included. (LMI)

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Sexual Harassment and Molestation in Education

a paper by Nan Stein
Wellesley College Center for Research on Women

presented at NOLPE convention
November 1993, Philadelphia, PA

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Sexual harassment IN SCHOOLS IS A PUBLIC EVENT, which means that there are WITNESSES, BYSTANDERS AND SPECTATORS to many of these occurrences - usually other students, but sometimes, ADULTS. I feel that this public performance aspect of S.H. makes it very damaging, not just to the targets of the S.H., but also to the bystanders, witnesses, who may learn the bitter lesson that school is not a safe or just place - kids may begin to worry about when it is going to happen to them next, and/or they won't be protected when they do become the targets of sexual harassment (Stein, 1992; 1993).

SCHOOLS MAY BE TRAINING GROUNDS FOR DOMESTIC VIOLENCE - BATTERING IN TRAINING: Listen to these chilling stories (Stein 1992):

- Being harassed makes me angry and I feel degraded. I'm always on my guard trying to prevent what may happen next. (13 year old African-American girl from a large city in Texas)

- Finally, I decided to tell the counselor and Dean of Students. I regret it to this day because they made me feel as if I were lying and I felt more interrogated than listened to. I felt really alone and stupid. (16 year old white girl from a city in North Dakota)

- Finally, I got the courage to do something about it. I told my principal what was happening. He was very skeptical about the whole thing, and he didn't do much about it. I wish I knew I was being harassed and had done something more about it... but I still felt like it was my fault, and I still do a little bit (14 year old white girl from a small town in PA).

- I also felt embarrassed and mad, but as if it were my fault by being nice or just letting it continue by doing nothing. (14 year old Mexican-American girl from Texas).

- I feel very terrible. I felt it was my fault, but it wasn't. I didn't tell teachers or the principal what happened. I think my problem is being scared. I'm scared they're going to do something worse if I tell. (12 year old Mexican-American girl from Texas).

- I grow angry, sad, and I had wanted to get back at him...I was very speechless and quiet for sometime, I felt like crying but, I kept it inside and didn't say anything to

anyone. (12 year old Chinese-American girl from New York City).

⊗ It made me feel cheap, like I was doing something I wasn't aware of to draw this kind of attention to myself. I could never stand up to him because I told him to stop he'd threaten me, so I began to act like it didn't bother me.. he'd hit me (hard enough to bruise me twice) and then pin my arms behind my back till it hurt and push against a wall and tell me all the awful things he would do to me if I ever hit him again, so I quit standing up to him again (14 year old white girl from small town in Michigan).

These girls sound like battered women in training - they learn that no one intervenes on their behalf/no one believes them; and if they do speak up, they are interrogated and/or blamed; they learn to adjust their behaviors in an effort to change the batterer's behavior;

●for boys - seems like permission to proceed, their behaviors go unsanctioned;.

● and for the boys who are not harassing, when they see some boys getting away with it, they might think that they are supposed to engage in this sort of behavior; "why not?" when no one is getting in trouble.

Last fall (October 1992), I began to call this a "TAILHOOK" happening in every school. - in 4 ways:

1. egregious behaviors are happening in public
2. there is a cover-up going on
3. the young women are speaking up, like the women in Tailhook did.

It is NOT that girls are NOT speaking up - they are.

4. The alleged perpetrators are getting off, either with a "wink and a nod," or through dismissals.

1993 gave us two SURVEYS on sexual harassment in schools:

1. the *Seventeen* magazine (results released in March);
2. the Harris/AAUW survey (released in June 1993).

These were released into a SOCIAL CONTEXT:
our *SEVENTEEN* magazine SURVEY -

- released in between the Glen Ridge, N.J. decision and the Lakewood, CA "Spur Posse" occurrences - two out of school events but not anomalies.
- These two events put our statistics into a different light - our statistics couldn't be easily dismissed since such horrific and/or offensive events were taking place and coming to light.

Our *Seventeen* survey:

- NOT A SCIENTIFIC, RANDOM SAMPLE; NOT AN INCIDENT SURVEY.

It is a survey designed to find out how sexual harassment happens in schools - what are the common features - who else is present - what is the experience like; how do girls and young women respond in the face of this harassment -- all questions which can inform a discussion about what we all, advocates, researchers, parents, educators and students, should do to prevent and eliminate sexual harassment in the schools.

Rather, a WRITE-IN SURVEY from motivated girls and young women (Stein, 1992)

- the statistics were very similar to the 1976 *REDBOOK* magazine survey, and had we listened to those 9000 women then, we might have avoided lawsuits, absenteeism, etc.

MAJOR FINDINGS

- SEXUAL HARASSMENT HAPPENS IN PUBLIC:

a) in 2/3s of the cases other people, friends, peers, teachers, are present;
b) it goes on in classrooms, in hallways, parking lots and playing fields, and at school sponsored activities.
c) and for 39% of the girls, it goes on everyday.

Next:

When the girls talk about sexual harassment, they are talking about whispers and stares and jokes, but THEY ARE ALSO TALKING ABOUT EVEN MORE DIRECT AND PHYSICAL BEHAVIORS:

a) 83% of the girls who responded experienced being pinched, touched and grabbed.

GIRLS DO RESPOND AND RESIST IN THE FACE OF THIS SEXUAL HARASSMENT:

in 87% of the cases, girls reported that they did something or a combination of actions:

- told their harassers to stop;
- they walked away from the harasser;
- resisted with physical force;
- told some one about the harassment.

And, finally, WE ASKED GIRLS FOR INFORMATION ON THE SCHOOLS RESPONSE:

They told us in that almost 1/2 of the time, 45% , schools did not respond.

On June 2, 1993 : HARRIS POLL/AAUW released their statistics; it was a scientific, random sample, 1600 students, 8-11th grades, boys & girls; 70 some schools in 16 towns.

high statistics: 76% of the boys and 85% of the girls reported experiencing sexual harassment. They used an overly broad definition, which claims "in your life."

And, the next day, the BACKLASH arrived.

• the 1993 version of the backlash is more sophisticated (beyond the religious right) - it is going after the overly broad definition of s.h. which now includes behaviors that were previously thought of as "roughhousing" or "horseplay"; or just see s.h. as "rudeness" and "anti-social behavior."

• I ask the backlash - is that how you also define "racial injustice"? NO ONE EVER CALLED THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT A "VICTIM RIGHTS MOVEMENT." THE BACKLASH NOW CALLS THESE SURVEYS, THESE GROUPS as "ADVOCACY RESEARCH" as a NEGATIVE LABEL. Strange use of the word, "ADVOCACY," when we are talking about implementation of laws which already exist.

• When I appeared on ABC's *NIGHTLINE with Ted Koppel* on 6/18/93, I was chastised for using the word "TERRORISM."
DESPITE THE FACT:
(In late June 1993, there were reports in the NY Times of games of "playing rape" on the schoolyard playground in Yonkers; school rapes in Montclair, N.J., and "WHIRLPOOLING" in the Bronx and at city pools in NYC - that is indeed my idea of TERRORISM).

• Not my first encounter with backlash
In 1982, I ACTUALLY MET THE BACKLASH - women who had been appointed by President Reagan to an advisory committee on Women's Educational Programs (NACWEP). These appointees saw the problme of sexual harassment as a problem of "MOTHERS WHO WORKED", and if they would only stay home and teach "manners to their sons," we wouldn't have this problem in schools.

ALL OF THESE NUMBERS WERE DROP INTO OBLIVION WERE IT NOT FOR THE COMPLAINTS, COURT CASES AND NARRATIVES OF YOUNG WOMEN.
• A LAWSUIT IS A SAMPLE SIZE OF ONE BUT SOMETIMES THAT ONE IS THE BIG ONE, LIKE THE HARRIS/FORKLIFT CASE OF NOV 93, AND THE FRANKLIN V. GWINNETT, GA CASE OF FEB. 92.

• I have found symmetry and parallels between what girls narratives tell us about their experiences in schools, and the experiences that are revealed through lawsuits and depositions. These experiences should not be happening to any ONE, and if some school administrators choose not to pay attention to the ONE child who is having these experiences, they do so at their own PERIL (Stein 1992).

"I've been harassed in FRONT of teachers and hall monitors, maybe even a janitor or two, and certainly other students, NONE OF WHOM took any action. They probably dismissed it as flirting, or maybe they were just ignorant or didn't care."
14 years old

"I have told teachers about this a number of times; each time nothing was done about it. Teachers would act as if I had

done something to cause it. Once I told a guidance counselor, but was made to feel like a whore when she asked questions like "Do you like it?" and "They must be doing it for a reason. What did you do to make them do it?" "

13 years old

"I feel that school administration needs to view this as a serious problem. After reporting (the sexual harassment) three times to the school administration, I was told that these boys were "flirting" and had a "crush" on me. They told me they would give the boys a strict warning. The harassing never stopped and I was humiliated; I'm scared. If you can't feel comfortable at school, how can you get a good education? Something has got to change."

14 years old

Let us be motivated by the hauntingly simple question posed by one 15 year old girl:

"Being sexually harassed at school made me feel upset, angry and violated. I mean, I shouldn't have to take this crap at school, should I? It's my right to go to school and not be harassed, isn't it? "

Yes, it is. Now, let's prove it to her and everyone else.

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